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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an innovative way to teach Introduction to Political Science by breaking with the convention of teaching a survey course of all political science subfields. Each student is invited to be a participant-observer and apply political science perspectives to the data collected from his/her personal polity. Readings, research, and writing are included in the course expectations. (EH)

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A Personal Polity Introduction to Political Science

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Submitted

By

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Prepared for presentation at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 31 - September 3, Chicago, Illinois

A Personal Polity Introduction to Political Science

This paper presents an innovative way to teach Introduction to Political Science. It breaks with the convention of teaching a survey course of all political science subfields. The approach presented here taps into the research on adults as learners and on the importance of writing to think and learn. Students are introduced to how political science concepts can reinterpret familiar worlds to them. Each student is invited to be a participant-observer and applier of political science perspectives to the data collected from his or her personal polity.

Course Overview

The course is organized on the basis of an outline that students are to follow when writing up their papers (See APPENDIX 1). The outline requires students to choose a personal polity to observe and write about as the first exercise. Students have chosen workplaces, living arrangements, sports teams, fraternities and sororities, social clubs, and families. Next, the students describe the polity's political economy. This is followed by a section on ideology in which students are informed of the most appropriate ideology for their polities. The goal of this section is for them to learn to distinguish between the different ideologies and explain why the others must be rejected in favor of the one that fits. Contextual values that underlie the political culture of the polity is the next topic. Individual action styles and group incentives in the next section shift the focus to individual behavior and ways of classifying or explaining it. The next major section covers a variety of topics related to government in the polity. These include leadership, lawmaking, the execution of decisions, and justice processes. And the final section covers the topics of subgovernments, current issues, and predictions related to the current issues.

The writing requirement can be divided into seven reports or less. I have usually chosen less. Since writing should be expected to be an iterative process improved by feedback, each student is given the opportunity to revise each written assignment for resubmission at the end of the course with all other revised assignments. To facilitate grading of each assignment, students are required to turn in all previous written

assignments. This helps to prevent confusion in grading, and provides checks for consistency, and gives an opportunity to provide additional feedback on previous assignments. When a class exceeds a manageable number of forty, I have selected random samples of student assignments to grade and give oral feedback to the class on performance and what is needed to improve the assignments. This could also be done for class sizes of forty or less.

The readings in the course-pack are tailored to the topics in the outline (See APPENDIX 2). For ideology I continue to use Kay Lawson's text (1985, 90-113). For contextual values of fairness, equality, privateness, and individuality I use readings from John Locke and John Stuart Mill (Woll, 48-54, 117-23). For individual participatory styles I use Lawson. For incentives on joining, staying, or leaving a polity I use James Q. Wilson's (1973) chapter , "Organizational Maintenance and Incentives," from his book, *Political Organizations*. For leadership I use a handout on Vroom's types of management decision styles. For the execution of decisions I introduce them to the "free rider, or collective action," problem through a variety of readings. I then introduce them to a reading on motivation by Douglas MacGregor in Stillman (1992), and to some theories of bureaucracy by March and Simon in the Shafritz and Whitbeck (1978) reader. I then have them read Foucault (1979) for a sense of how hierarchical organizations seek to control their members. I then provide them with a reading on dysfunctions arising from bureaucratic controls as an introduction to how individuals react to such controls from Porter, et. al. (1975). For the justice section I have the students read French (1978) on organizational justice. And the last reading is from Elton Mayo on informal groups (Stillman 1992).

This brief overview demonstrates that I supplement these readings with lectures in order to cover everything in the outline. In fact, I may again revise my course readings to better fit the written exercises in the personal polity outline. I have changed them from my initial teaching of the course, and, I now revise the outline to give more useful instructions for the assignments. I supplement the readings with my lectures.

In my lectures I apply the concepts from the outline to personal polities that I have experienced, and in general terms to student polities without identifying them. Usually, students begin asking questions about

their polities, and we analyze them with respect to the exercises of applying the concepts in the outline. When the students begin asking these questions, the class shifts from a lecture to a seminar discussion with a dramatic improvement in class participation and attendance. Students learn quickly that what they learn from class can be immediately applied to their written assignments. They also learn that missing a class can cost them with respect to comprehension and understanding of the political science concepts and how they applied to their polities.

Match of the Course to the Educational Literature on Effective Teaching

When I designed this course, I had become familiar with what many educators thought was effective teaching from taking three courses with them on field research methods and from being married to a elementary school teacher who specializes in teaching children with learning disabilities. While writing this paper, I have sought out the literature in order to demonstrate that way of teaching this course would be thought to be effective by educational researchers. I now turn to this literature to illustrate the matches between my practices and its prescriptions for effective teaching.

My course design rejects the conventional survey design of an introductory course for a survey of how the concepts have utility for interpreting the personal real world of students. This personalizes the subject matter for students in a way that Eble (1988, 189) says that could motivate them to learn the material. My strategy of illustrating to the students what I want them to know and be able to do by the end of the course is recommended by Chet Meyers and Thomas B. Jones (1993) and Charles Bonwell and James A. Eison (1991). They call my strategy "active learning."

The field work applications of abstract concepts to concrete settings fits with the research findings on how adults learn. Eunice Newton in her review of the research on adults as learners declares that researchers find that "postponed, logical, sequentially developed subject matter must be eschewed in favor of field-centered, work-related learning (1977, 362)." Newton cites Knowles (1973) to explain why this is so:

> ..an adult's orientation to learning is problem-centered and in the here and now. Immediate application of learning is at a high premium since the learner "comes into an educational

> activity largely because he... wants to apply tomorrow what he learns today (Knowles, 48, in Newton 1977, 390)."

My imposition of the structure of a paper outline to guide student analysis of personal polities is what Barbara Gross Davis (1993) recommends. She prescribes identifying specific tasks to undertake (167), connecting field experiences with academic inquiry (169), and giving explicit assignments (170).

My insistence upon written assignments as an essential tool for learning political science concepts is backed up by two textbook writers on *Content Area Reading*. They say:

> When students write to learn in content area classrooms, they are involved in a process of manipulating, clarifying, discovering, and synthesizing ideas. The writing process can be a powerful strategy for helping students gain insight into course material. The value of writing, therefore, lies in its use as a tool for comprehending. What's more, writing and reading often are interwoven. Students who write more, read more (Richard T. Vacca and Joanne L. Vacca 1986, 248).

Besides learning more about course content Vacca and Vacca point out that the students might read more in the process of writing. This means that the students might actually read what has been assigned in order to do better on the written exercise.

My provision of a fairly elaborate outline, according to Vacca and Vacca, fulfills another prescription on using writing assignments. They say that "(a)n explicit assignment helps students to assess the purpose, audience, and form of writing as well as the writer's role (Vacca and Vacca 1986, 248).

Writing has other benefits too. It requires thinking that taps all the intellectual skills in Bloom's taxonomy according to Sandra Tomlinson (1990, 32). It facilitates learning by making sense of new information and relating it to prior knowledge and experience (Tomlinson, 32), and, fortunately, it can result in long-term memory of what was learned (Tomlinson , 32).

My written assignment and my practice of giving written feedback to the students on how to improve their essays conforms to the literature's recommendations. My way of teaching the students how to do the assignment, for example, is what Davis (1993, 213-20) considers to be effective teaching since I keep a file of good papers, distribute a handout, my outline, discuss each assignment in class, and break it into manageable chunks. The personal polity topic is a practice that, Brookfield (1990, 99) says, gives more

exceptions have been students who want to write about policy politics, and those who insist upon giving unconventional answers to questions in the outline.

Students who write about the politics of policy have usually chosen a governmental setting as their personal polities. They want to write about such politics, and will resist seeing the personal politics of their settings. I have found it best to condition choices of personal polities with my approval in order to avoid this conflict. In this way, I can redirect the student's efforts toward what the rest of the class is doing.

When I give the students answers for what would be appropriate for their polities, I always mention that the student is free to choose a different answer but that he or she must defend it extremely well. The topic where this occurs most frequently is ideology. I have students claiming that his or her workplace follows liberalism, or that the family follows liberalism. In my most exceptional case, I had a student claiming that his family followed fascism.

Of course, I disagreed with the student on classifying his family's ideology as fascism. But over the entire course of having him turn in other assignments, I learned why he believed this to be so. Eventually, I was inclined to agree with him if he would rewrite the ideology section of his paper which he did.

In most cases of such disagreement, I am usually able to convince the student of why his or her answer is inappropriate. This is where having the students turn in past assignments with the current assignment can be very helpful in persuading the student that his or her previous answer was wrong. I can point to what they write in the current assignment and show them how this could not be if the previous answer was right.

A benefit that has occurred for me since assigning students the personal polity exercise is what I have learned about student lives. I have learned about the inner workings of many workplaces, student clubs, sports teams, student living arrangements, and student families. I have come to respect students more as a result of this learning.

For the students the experience of writing about a personal polity can be cathartic or can motivate them to take action with respect to their membership. After teaching the course, and even during it, I will

encounter students who will express gratitude for what the course is teaching them about the operations of their polities. One student who worked as a retail sale clerk thanked me for helping her see the manipulative side of her boss. Another who wrote about work was motivated to quit the job and find another one. For those in living arrangement polities, the experience has proven to be very cathartic as they work through collective action problems and other problems of living together. For those who write about family polities, there has been a mix of cathartic experiences and motivation to take action. The writing about a sorority by one student when shared with the other students revealed that the major mission of such clubs is to help keep students in school until graduation. Students perceive benefits from my course beyond the learning of political science concepts, they learn a different perspective for looking at their world. For some this motivates action, and for others it provides a release from the conflict they have experienced by writing about it.

Student benefits from the course besides learning the material is a logical consequence of having the student apply a political science perspective to their real world of personal polities. These student can now articulate what is truly meant when someone claims "Well, that's politics." For myself the learning has been in understanding the concepts better than ever before, and discovering more about the operations of many types of organizations.

You may be saying that the way I teach introduction to political science is fine for me but it just would never work for you. A short time after I initially taught the course this way, a colleague of mine copied my approach for teaching a course called "Political Behavior." He was very pleased with the result. He did not slavishly copy my outline and use my course-pack. He developed his own approach based on his strengths in the discipline of political science. When I developed my list of course topics, I found it helpful to use as a model Kay Lawson's introduction to political science text, *The Human Polity* (1985). In fact, I used her text for my initial teaching of the course in this manner. By the time, I was scheduled to teach it a second time, I was ready to tailor the course more to my strengths by revising the topic list and the assigned readings. I would suggest the same approach to others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the merits of this teaching approach. The Personal Polity Introduction to Political Science works well for adult learners, including typical college-age students, because it provides a familiar setting for a student to try out what he is learning in a writing exercise that demands application, and for which he or she receives written feedback besides a grade. The students benefit from this approach for another reason. He or she is practicing writing persuasive essays that causes thinking and learning about political science. Another student benefit will be the fact that the lessons learned will be learned for a lifetime instead of just being memorized for a final exam. The instructor benefits from the development of his understanding of concepts and theories in his field, from learning about the lives of students, and from what he learns about operations of polities different from the usual governmental one.

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APPENDIX 1

Personal Polity Paper Outline

I. **Introduction** - Identify your polity, (Be sure to mention whether the polity is part of a larger organization.) include the number of members (There should a minimum of three.), and give your membership role in it.
Inform me on how long you have been a member.

II. **Individual Goals Sought in the Polities**
For yourself answer the following questions: What goal are you pursuing in the polity? Is it intrinsic or instrumental? Explain why it has to be one and not the other.

III. **Political Economy**
Provide information on the following factors:

1. Resources: property, income, and wealth of the polity and its members

2. Economic development: abilities of the members, division of labor, and technological development

3. Distribution of wealth: income and wealth of the members

4. Redistribution measures: income assistance or other assistance to individuals from the group or wealthier members

5. Political stability: irregular changes in leadership, domestic unrest, membership turnover

IV. **Ideology**
Choose one of the following ideologies: conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and fascism. Defend your choice by answering the questions below and arguing why the other ideologies do not apply.

1. In what ways are decisions made?

2. What view of human nature and change dominates your polity?

3. What behavior is most rewarded, individual or group?

4. Can anyone be the leader?

Answer the questions first and then rule out competing ideologies. A workplace or sports team is likely to be fascist, a family conservative, a fraternity, sorority, club or living arrangement liberalism. No polity is likely to be socialist unless it was established for the purpose of promoting economic equality.

V. **Contextual Values - Political Culture**
Choose one of the following values: fairness, equality, privateness, and individuality. Analyze to what extent the value is present in your polity. You can use rules, norms, laws, and practices as evidence. Describe an incident that involved your chosen value.

VI. **Individual Action Styles and Group Incentives**

1. What is the form of government? How does the form of government interact with the style of individual participation? What style of individual participation does it promote?

2. Individual participatory styles: Give profiles using the seven modes of participation: apathetic inactive, passive supporter, contact specialist, communicators, party and campaign workers, community activists, and protester. Be sure to defend your choices with evidence.

3. For one person other than yourself analyze the incentives for joining your polity, staying in your polity, or leaving your polity. Use the incentive typology of purposive, specific solidary, collective solidary, and material incentives. For a family analyze the decision to either marry or have children.

VI. **Government**

1. Leadership: Classify the dominant style of decision-making in your polity, and describe the exceptions to the dominant style. Give evidence from the decisions made in your polity.

2. Lawmaking: Who makes the rules? What is the process? For one rule what values are expressed?
For the basic personal polities there will be overriding missions that underlie the values and are present in the rules. At the workplace profit overrides, for a club survival, for a family training, and for living arrangements cooperation.

3. Execution of Decisions:

a. Report on the controls used to avoid malfeasance and misfeasance, such as:

1. staffing: hiring and firing, accepting and expelling members, joining and leaving

You are writing about what is done to prevent an adverse selection. An adverse selection occurs when someone who joins the polity does not meet expectations of the polity.

2. organizational structure: enclosure, partitioning, ranking and functional sites

A sense of enclosure is that condition the distinguishes a member from a nonmember. It enforces a sense of group identity.

Partitioning is the space in the organization, physical or otherwise, that you occupy apart from your coworkers. It facilitates a supervisory check for absences.

Ranking is the relative authority of people in the policy. It facilitates supervision by manipulating ambition for the good of the organization.

Functional site means anything in the design of the physical setting that facilitates supervision by superiors.

3. organizational law: give an example of a law and the penalty or reward given respectively for nonconformance or conformance. How are instances recorded in order to promote compliance?

4. organizational information technology: What individual records are kept on each member by the organization?

5. outside audits: Are there inspections? What forms do they take? How do their evaluative nature promote the gaze or panopticism by the superiors in the organization or to superiors outside the organization?

b. Describe an incident where a superior's action, order, directive or rule appeared inappropriate, incorrect, or disagreeable.

c. What behaviors result in positive notice from superiors?
What behaviors result in negative notice from superiors?
What behaviors appear to be wasted in obtaining notice?
Describe an incident for each type of the above behaviors.

d. How did you or someone else persuade a superior to go along with your, his or her proposal?

f. How do you protect yourself during a negative experience with your superior? Describe an incident based upon your experience or someone else's experience.

4. **Justice**

Be sure to classify the issue of justice in your incident as either distributive or corrective. Analyze the justice system in your polity by the elements of due process that are present or absent.

a. workplace: Describe the grievance system for a distributive issue; or, describe the progressive discipline system and the process for disciplinary appeals. Describe a grievance incident.

(1) Sports team: Describe how one defends oneself when the coach seeks to discipline someone for an infraction of rules or norms that govern behavior, or how one appeals a decision that adversely affects one's ranking on the team.

b. living arrangement: Describe the lease situation and the handling of problems by the landlord. Describe an incident of how a problem was handled by the landlord. You may also focus on the handling of justice issues over correction or distribution within your polity among your living mates.

c. clubs: Describe the membership appeals process for either a distributive or a corrective justice issue; and, if possible, describe an incident. Give the frequency of usage.

d. family: Describe the appeal process, or the divorce process, or the resolution of conflicts over distributive justice issues; or, describe the appeals process for corrective justice issues. Give an incident related to your choice.

VII. Subgovernments, Current Issues, and Predictions

1. Subgovernments:

a. Describe the federal system:
Decision units within the workplace, hierarchical places in the organization chart
(If you choose hierarchical places be sure to describe the types of decisions made at each level.)
Affiliation with larger units for the workplace, the living arrangement, and the club
In a living arrangement, describe the separate responsibilities versus the responsibilities of the whole group.
For family polities, describe the extended family relations outside and inside the home, or the formal division of responsibilities and authority within the nuclear family.

b. interest groups: Identify them and explain why they qualify as interest groups.
workplace, e.g. union, informal groups, job class groups
clubs, e.g. the "good time" seekers, the active faithful, etc.
living arrangements: describe the grouping behavior
family, e.g. sibling and parental relationships: A key question to answer with evidence is how often do they do things together?

2. Current Issues and Predictions or Problems and Solutions: Choose one area and predict a change or solution that is related to a current issue or problem. Be sure to describe the current issue clearly.
Examples of areas:

1. technology: changes in the ways the polity performs its tasks
2. future plans: for the polity as a whole what is planned to change
3. social relations: any anticipated changes in interest groups
4. political structure: government aspects

I would prefer that those students with living arrangement polities would stay away from the area of future plans.
You might be able to help yourself in your analysis by framing a current issue as a problem, and the prediction as an anticipated solution.

APPENDIX 2

Course Pack Readings

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